

Exhibition in Berlin: Rediscovery of a Russian revolutionary art school

Sibylle Fuchs, Verena Nees
31 March 2015

“VKhUTEMAS: A Russian Laboratory of Modernity—Architectural Designs 1920-1930,” at the Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, December 5, 2014 to April 6, 2015.

A remarkable exhibition, featuring the art and architecture of the early Soviet Union’s Vkhutemas [acronym in Russian for Higher Art and Technical Studios] school, is currently at Berlin’s Martin-Gropius-Bau museum, until April 6. For the first time, some 250 works—drawings, sketches, paintings, photographs and models, mainly in the field of architecture—created by the students and teachers of the Moscow workshops, which existed from 1920 to 1930, are on display.

The exhibition was organised by the Shchusev State Museum of Architecture in Moscow, based on extensive research into numerous archives, as well as interviews with graduates of the school and the families of former teachers. Researchers were thus able to bring to light long-lost designs, construction plans and models. The exhibition provides a fascinating insight into a neglected school of art that revolutionised modern architecture.

The displayed works of the Vkhutemas students range from designs for residential buildings, theatres, kiosks, swimming pools, sports stadiums, working men’s clubs and entire cities to student research projects on theoretical questions such as “mass and weight”, “colour and spatial composition” and “geometric properties of a form”. The sketches of complex urban roofscapes, imaginatively conceived recreation centres in natural settings, seemingly weightless buildings with vibrantly curved features, aesthetic structuring and facades for industrial buildings—all testify to such a wealth of radicalism, experimentation and diversity of ideas that many Bauhaus [German art school, 1919-1933] creations fade in comparison.

All the designs, even the bold and less realistic ones like the floating skyscrapers attached to balloons, also evoke a sense of the seriousness with which architectural commissions assigned by the workers’ state were undertaken after the October Revolution.

On December 19, 1920, Lenin announced the Soviet government’s resolve to establish the Higher Artistic and Technical Workshops—Vkhutemas. The aim was to use the visual arts in the training of technically, politically and scientifically educated architects and designers in all disciplines. In the ten years of its existence, Vkhutemas became a laboratory of modern architecture and art, in which diverse artistic ideas and methods, such as classicism, constructivism, psychoanalytic approaches and even futurism came together.

Time and again, the media refers to Vkhutemas as the Russian Bauhaus. Many scholars in the West have insisted on seeing the Bauhaus movement in Weimar and Dessau as a model for the Russian architectural avant-garde. However, the exhibition throws this conception into question. Although Vkhutemas had close ties to Bauhaus and the latter held some concepts and ideas in common with the Soviet workshops, the relationship is rather the reverse. In her contribution to the catalogue, Barbara Kreis writes that the works of the students and teachers are “unmatched, and

later often served architects as templates and sources of inspiration”.

The sheer scope of the training and the vast number of students and teachers make it clear that the Moscow workshops mark a unique stage in the development of modern architecture. Some 2,000 students enrolled in the first year alone, while Bauhaus trained only about 150 in the same time frame.

Many famed Russian artists and avant-garde architects were at least temporarily Vkhutemas teachers and these included Alexander Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, Vladimir Tatlin, Vladimir Krinsky, Alexander Vesnin and his brothers Viktor and Leonid, Lyubov Popova, Naum Gabo, El Lissitzky, Nikolai Ladovsky, Konstantin Melnikov, Moisei Ginzburg, Alexey Shchusev, Wassily Kandinsky, Aleksandra Ekster and Gustav Klutsis.

The Vkhutemas school’s reputation also spread internationally and reached New York, where the works of its students were exhibited. Alfred H. Barr, the founding director of the Museum of Modern Art, travelled specifically to visit the Vkhutemas in Moscow in 1928. The Soviet pavilion designed by Melnikov and Rodchenko’s Workers Club were accorded great recognition at the 1925 International Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts in Paris.

The designs and sketches now shown in Berlin form eloquent testimony to the tremendous spirit of optimism that the October Revolution unleashed in architecture and other art forms. A documentary film, made by the German WDR broadcaster in 1984 and shown at the exhibition, features the comments of contemporaries, enthusiastically recalling their years of study in the Vkhutemas. Describing the atmosphere, one said he “always climbed stairs two steps at a time and, going down, in leaps and bounds”.

Curator Irina Tschepkunowa also writes in the introduction to the catalogue that one can scarcely any longer imagine in today’s “pragmatically oriented” Russia the enthusiasm that broke out after the revolution. “Hunger and destruction during war communism, the ongoing civil war in the country’s border areas and the impoverished everyday life provoked in young people—as strange as this may seem today—not dejection, but an unprecedented creative enthusiasm and willingness to work”.

Establishing the Vkhutemas

Training in the Vkhutemas was focused on the mobilisation of all talents for the building of a socialist society. Immediately after the revolution, the academies and art schools, reserved for the privileged social elites, were abolished and artistic training procedures reformed with the introduction of free state art workshops. All who wanted to study art could enroll at such schools. This also initially applied to the Vkhutemas, where

participation in preparatory courses of the RabFak workers' university was obligatory in 1921 for workers and young people without qualifications. In 1925, an examination assessing artistic talent was also introduced as an entry requirement.

The Vkhutemas were divided into eight faculties that included three art workshops: painting (panel, monumental and decorative painting), sculpture and architecture, as well as five production workshops: graphics, textiles, ceramics, metal and wood working. Lidia Komarova, an architect and a 1929 graduate of the Vkhutemas described the overall orientation of the workshops as follows: "The goal was to unite art with production, science with technology and the new content of socialist life with the needs of the people". (1)

The introduction to the workshops programme stated: "The tasks posed by modern life completely undermine the principles of socially agreed artistic specialisation and at the same time demand knowledge and professional skills, which up to now have been developed in the various specialisations of master craftsmen ... At the present moment we do not need any self-sufficing 'vision' or 'project'... It is therefore the task of the present production workshop to bring together the specialist skills of artists in order to meet the actual requirements of individual and collective consumption". (2) All the workshops pursued these general objectives. The catalogue and Barbara Kreis' contribution in particular provide detailed information about the teaching concepts and methods that we can only briefly sketch here.

Instruction in the academic workshops was committed to a rather traditional kind of training. Guided by the notion of "living classicism", it sought to impart the traditional heritage of architectural forms, formal elements and methods in conformity with the conditions laid down by building socialism. People's Commissar of Education Anatoly Lunacharsky justified this by stressing that students must be able to draw on a properly understood classical tradition.

This contrasted greatly with the approach of the United Left Workshops (Obmas), a Vkhutemas department that began working along the lines of Nikolai Ladovsky's "psychoanalytic teaching method" in collaboration with Vladimir Krinsky and Nikolai Dokuchaev. The architect Ladovsky (1881-1941) worked from 1918 to 1920 in the Architecture and Art Bureau of the Moscow Soviet of People's Deputies and defined the objectives of architecture as the artistic mediation of bodies and space in 1919. His Vkhutemas laboratory was devoted to research into the psychological perception of space and the local conditions.

The experimental architecture workshop was based on theories of the structure of "architectural organisms", developed by architects Ilya Golosov and Konstantin Melnikov. It attracted relatively few students and was closed in the mid-1920s. Among its aims was the creation of a harmonious incorporation of all areas of life by means of spatial form and its aesthetics.

Particularly from the mid-1920s, a major role was played in the Vkhutemas by the Constructivists and Productivists. Like their utilitarian counterparts in Western Europe, they advocated functional buildings of glass, concrete and steel, and were strongly oriented toward meeting the immediate needs of housing and the construction of industrial and public buildings. But they also included aesthetically pleasing forms in their projects. The ugly prefabricated buildings and apartment blocks, known in the former German Democratic Republic [East Germany] and all over eastern Europe, belonged to the period of the horrific Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union.

An interesting example of Constructivist aesthetics in the exhibition is the Vesnin brothers' 1924 competition design for the Leningrad Pravda publishing house, which was praised in the press as "Chrystal in a supersaturated solution". (4) Alexander Vesnin taught in the academic department's painting and freehand drawing faculty.

Debates on the art of the Vkhutemas

The exhibition draws attention to another important point. Although the Bolshevik leadership was averse to technical and artistic training at the Vkhutemas along the lines of *l'art pour l'art*, art for art's sake, it allowed the different artistic movements wide freedom to advocate and test their theories.

Lenin himself wanted art education to be firmly scientifically based, but he was unwilling to force on anyone what he admitted were his own conservative tastes in art. Just how true this is can be seen from the private discussion he was keen to have with Vkhutemas students. Alexander W. Stepanov recorded the following: "After the founding of Vkhutemas Lenin took the opportunity to meet with the Vkhutemas students, despite the serious political situation in the country and its claims on his attention. Lenin did not want an official talk with the students and that is why he took advantage of his acquaintance with the family of his comrade, Inessa Armand, a very well-educated woman who spoke various languages and served the revolution faithfully until her death. Armand had two daughters, Inna and Varya, the latter being a student at the Vkhutemas. Late in the evening of February 21, 1921, Lenin and his wife Krupskaya arrived in the Vkhutemas student dormitory in former Myasnitskaya Street. There they talked together for about three hours". (5)

The various artistic trends often clashed sharply. Kandinsky, who was closely associated with the German avant-garde and in 1922 accepted a call to join the Weimar Bauhaus, represented a spiritually intuitive approach to art and was criticised by others as "metaphysical". Rodchenko saw the artist's task as an obligation "to give a communist expression to materialistic constructive work". He wanted to transform studio work into a practical or useful activity.

Tatlin, coming from futurism, and Kazimir Malevich were also usually enveloped in violent feuds with one another. Tatlin criticised the constructivists for mechanically linking their art with technology, while in reality merely creating decorative stylistic forms. He himself was concerned with art as a means of humanising technology. Some of the Vkhutemas artists, such as Malevich, Popova, Stepanova and Rodchenko had connections with the Left Front of the Arts (LEF) or were supporters of Proletkult [the Proletarian Culture movement].

Despite their conflicts, the Russian avant-garde artists in the Vkhutemas—in contrast to avant-garde representatives in the capitalist metropolises—had one thing in common: they wanted artistic training not merely to express styles and tendencies, but primarily to convey the knowledge, methods and means required for the establishment of a new kind of society. Unlike Bauhaus, they did not subscribe to the outright rejection of "bourgeois" art forms of the past, but allowed for the legitimacy of all styles, as long as they served the goals of a socialist society and the raising of the cultural level of the working class.

The Red Stadium

In addition to the close and collegial relationship between teachers and students, the training at the Vkhutemas was unusual in that specific tasks were often set that were then realised in Moscow. This enabled students to benefit from direct practical experience. Examples include Georgy Golts's diploma project for the Ostankino garden city and especially the International Red Stadium in Moscow's Sparrow Hills, whose fascinating engineering and architectural history occupies a large section of the exhibition.

The competition for the Red Stadium was won by Ladovsky, whose

assistant was Krinsky. The diploma theses of Mikhail Korzhev and Sergei Glagolev also dealt with this subject. Many students were involved in the completion of these diploma projects, both in drawing up drafts, preparing for construction work and surveying the site. A photograph in the exhibition shows teachers and students with shovels, taking a break from work.

The stadium was not only meant to be a centre for international competitions of workers' sports organisations—with two sports arenas and grandstands for 60,000 spectators, a swimming pool, showers, changing rooms, yacht clubs, canoeing, rowing and cycling routes and several winter sports facilities—but also a centre for various forms of entertainment, leisure activities and events with theatres, cinemas, roundabouts, swings, etc.

For a variety of reasons this ambitious project could not be realised. In the first place, sufficient funding could not be guaranteed. But in the course of the preparatory work, the unreliable ground for the building's foundation also proved to be an insurmountable obstacle, in view of the limited technical possibilities available at the time to meet the challenge.

Other drafts, such as those for the City of the Future diploma project on display in the exhibition were based less on the immediate feasibility, than the possibilities offered by a future socialist society—such a project was Georgy Krutikov's Communal House of the Flying City.

The end of Vkhutemas

Most of the projects, however, remained on paper. The reason is mainly to be found in the degeneration of the Soviet Union and the rise of the bureaucratic caste under Stalin. From the mid-1920s, Stalin pursued the nationalist policy of "socialism in one country" and eventually sought to strangle all attempts to develop revolutionary innovations. In architecture, as in the other art forms, "socialist realism" was ultimately held up as the only acceptable doctrine. Futuristic designs were denigrated as "formalism". Henceforth reactionary styles, corresponding to the taste of the backward, provincial party bureaucracy and Stalin himself, predominated.

As Trotsky wrote in *The Revolution Betrayed*: "While the dictatorship had a seething mass basis and a prospect of world revolution, it had no fear of experiments, searchings, the struggle of schools, for it understood that only in this way could a new cultural epoch be prepared. ... the present ruling stratum considers itself called upon not only to control spiritual creation politically, but also to prescribe its roads of development." (6)

In 1927, the school was renamed the Higher Artistic and Technical Institute (Vkhutein). On the occasion of the first five-year plan of 1928, Stalin's government subordinated architectural training to the People's Commissariat for the Economy, instead of Education. From 1926, concepts of housing along the lines of Fordism and Taylorism in the capitalist West were already being developed in the workshop for experimental architecture. The innovative designs developed in previous years, which linked the struggle against housing shortage to a vision of humane living conditions for working class families, were discarded.

The All-Russian of Proletarian Architects (VOPRA), founded by the Stalinists, accused the constructivists and rationalists of "eclecticism", claiming they refused to defend the interests of the proletariat.

In 1930, Stalin finally closed the Vkhutein and integrated several departments, such as painting and sculpture, into other facilities. The architecture department entered into the new Higher Architectural and Construction Institute (known as the Moscow Institute of Architecture from 1933).

P. Novitsky, the last head of Vkhutein, said: "We expend the capital accumulated since the revolution by destroying the art schools". (7) After their closure, the Vkhutemas archive disappeared for decades, many of their teachers fell into disfavour or became victims of the purges, and the revolutionary art workshops dropped out of memory.

The historical reasons for the closure of the schools are only very vaguely touched upon in the catalogue and texts accompanying the exhibits. Nothing is conveyed about the fate of the teachers and students under the Stalin regime. Some apparently adapted themselves to the new requirements and tried to exercise their skills in the context of the major construction projects of the 1930s. Nikolai Kolli and Alexander Vesnin were among the architects of the great Dnieper hydroelectric station. Krinsky also worked on dam projects.

Gustav Klutskis, who participated in the design of the Soviet pavilion at the Paris World's Fair of 1937, was arrested during the purges and shot in 1938. Moisei Ginsburg was attacked as a "formalist" in the 1930s, excluded from the teaching profession and received no further commissions. Ginsburg initially spoke out for the avant-garde, but finally bowed to the pressure of the Stalinist dictatorship, as did Ilya Golosov. Constructivist architect Ivan Leonidov was also the subject of malicious attacks in *Pravda*.

The photographs by Richard Pare, shown in the *Building the Revolution: Soviet Art and Architecture, 1915–1935* at the Martin-Gropius-Bau museum in 2012 and documented in a catalogue bearing the same title and published by Mehring Books, testify to the sad fate of the buildings, some of which were erected in the spirit of Vkhutemas by teachers and students after the school's closure.

Even though the Vkhutemas exhibition has little to say about the historical background, it is of great importance. At a time of fierce anti-Russian propaganda the exhibition organisers in Moscow and the Gropius-Bau are to be applauded for providing an objective assessment of the cultural achievements of the first years of the Soviet Union.

To a certain extent, the works speak for themselves. They refute the lie that the October Revolution inevitably led to Stalinism, and show quite the opposite, that the first attempt to create a more humane society retains all its fascination.

The exhibition is running until April 6, 2015. The catalog costs €20.

Original notes [all works in German, except for *The Revolution Betrayed*]:

1) Lidja Konstantinowna Komarowa: *Die ArchitekturFakultät der WCHUTEMAS und des WCHUTEIN 1920-1930*, in: Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Hochschule für Architektur und Bauwesen Weimar, 26. Jg. 1979, S. 319-322.

2) <http://www.societyofcontrol.com/akademie/post.htm>

3) *WCHUTEMAS – ein russisches Labor der Moderne Architekturentwürfe 1920-1930*, Hrsg.: Schtschussew-Museum für Architektur Moskau, Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berliner Festspiele, Berlin 2014.

4) ebd., S. 35.

5) Alexander W. Stepanow: *Das Bauhaus und die WCHUTEMAS. Über methodologische Analogien im Lehrsystem.* <https://e-pub.uni-weimar.de/opus4/frontdoor/index/index/docId/951>

6) Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, New Park, 1973, p 181.

7) *WCHUTEMAS – ein russisches Labor der Moderne*. Katalog, S. 38.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact